

# Three Tinks on the House

F. M. Busby

*It's possible for governments to legislate against large families in order to slow or eliminate population rise. But most people are emotionally resistant to such measures, so even when the resources-versus-consumers equation clearly passes into the negative, politicians who wish to be reelected will probably limit themselves to purely economic sanctions. These may, however, be augmented by peer pressure—which can have violent and sad results, as in the story below.*

*F. M. Busby is the author of The Demu Trilogy, Rissa Kerguellen, and Zelde M'Tana.*

FOUR O'CLOCK in the morning! Why do you have to work such crazy hours?" Stuffing the thirty-hour week into three days cuts commuter traffic a lot, but it doesn't do Hi much for my wife's disposition. "If I didn't have to ride in with you for this damned dentist's appointment..."

Normally, Linda's a good-looking woman—big green eyes, shiny black hair in a monkey-fur cut, skin holding up better than most. After eighteen years of marriage I still like to look at her, especially when she smiles. But when she's feeling hacked about something, she can look like a witch.

"More coffee?" I said, and poured for her. "Good breakfast, honey." I'd finished my egg, toast, and juice and was relaxing over coffee.

"Wouldn't be so bad, Johnny, if it didn't take so long to get to town."

"All right! Let's get out where there's room to breathe, you said. Okay, here we are. Out of the high-rise jungle—no apartments over fourteen stories. Of course, they're *all* fourteen, but what the hell. Use of the pool Tuesdays and Fridays if we want. Our own parking slot in the secured area. So it takes a little longer to get to work; you win some, you lose some."

"I suppose. If I just had my own car again..." She stopped, and smiled a little. Not much, but a little. Breakfast was beginning to help. "Look, I know it's not practical—the double tax on second cars and all. It's only that I had a lot more fun when I had my own job and my own car."

"Sure, I know, Linda." A computer took her job and the Eco Laws took her car. I Was glad she hadn't rubbed my nose in one bet I'd lost; when the first big Eco crunch had hit, the color-coded routes and the Federal horsepower tax, I'd had to sell the one car to pay for propane conversion on the newer one. I'd thought propane was a safe bet, and only a five-dollar tax per horse instead of the twenty for Diesel or gas-hogs. Not to mention the saving on fuel tax...

So what happened? The Enumclaw Freeway, my best route to Seattle, had been coded yellow—*no* internal combustion. Commuter-wise, I was up the creek. But to convert to an outside-burner I'd have had to put a second mortgage on the apartment. Well, I'd taken the chance, and lost.

She made a grimace, a little one-sided grin. "Maybe Metro Transit really will run the Renton line down here, complete the loop to Kent. They keep promising. You know, with all the taxes we pay..."

"Yeah. The taxes." I sipped the dregs and stood. "Ready?"

"*Un momenta*. Better safe than sorry." She went into the bathroom.

I had to smile, remembering her story of the last time she'd stopped at a service station to exchange the left-hand propane tank for a full one. First there was a guy in the John who stayed a long time, and when

he came out he let the door go locked. Any decent fellow would have held it for her, with the attendant not watching. Then it turned out she wasn't carrying that company's credit card, and the door scanner wasn't programmed to recognize her bank card. The station attendant couldn't be bothered to help.

"Unlock this Goddamned door," she'd said, "or I'll piddle right here in front of it!"

But he'd told her, "Go ahead, lady. The fifty bucks for littering, you *can* put on your bank card." There wasn't any other place handy, so she'd had to hold it until she got home.

On second thought, it wasn't funny. Those things used to be free, part of the service—not a gimmick to promote a company's own credit cards.

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Linda was ready to go. I cut the alarms, checked the hallway, and motioned for her to come out. I made sure to thumb the ten-second reset button before closing the door behind us. The building hadn't had a successful break-in during the four years we'd lived there, and only one killing and two rapes in the halls. But still I think it pays to stick to the routine.

We showed I.D. to the guard by the elevators, to the one in the elevator itself and at our parking sub-deck. The man on duty there handed me our car keys. As we walked away he was alerting the outside guard over the intercom.

The car was an '82 VW Matador, remodeled slightly for the propane. Even if I couldn't drive it on the yellow-coded freeway, I still liked it. For one thing, it covered only seventy-five square feet of ground space; the size kept my surcharge down to \$225. The Matador started on the first try; I drove slowly through the well-lighted aisles.

The inner doors were open. I drove through them into the security pocket, waited for them to close behind me and then for the outer gates to open. We were on our way. The smog wasn't at all bad; I could see the sun.

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Old Route 516 was still coded blue, barred only to gasoline and Diesel. It was slow, a four-lane back road crowded with freeway-rejects like myself, but it was the best route available.

"Do you know if Marise came home last night, Linda?"

"No. I mean she didn't. She and Sydni were going to stay with Ali and George." I felt relief—Marise and her girlfriend, at seventeen, were still satisfied with the young studs in our own safe building.

"Ali and George, again? She could do worse. Anything serious, do you think?" We were approaching the interchange to I-5 North; I switched lanes. By rights, I suppose, I-5 should be yellow. But it's the only good secondary route north into Seattle, so most of the time it stays blue. Luckily for me.

"Marise says she and Syd would like to try a four-marriage there for a while, if they could pry the two boys out of each others' arms long enough. Not for children, yet; you know Marise is in no hurry to make paternity choices."

I swung into the interchange and merged onto I-5 North. Not far ahead, I could see high-rise country looming. But my mind was on our kids.

"Yes, she'll be all right," I said. "George doesn't have much in the way of brains, but those four aren't

likely to hurt each other much. And since the abortion, Marise gets her implants renewed, right on schedule. But..."

"It's Les that bothers you, isn't it?"

I didn't answer immediately. I was trying to think it out—how I felt, and how much of what I felt was leftover from cultural conditioning.

We passed the first Sea-Tac exit. The old airport wouldn't handle anything bigger than a 747. But as long as the FAA still defined flight-paths in piston-engine terms, Sea-Tac held the high-rises at bay.

"Yeah, Les," I said, finally. "I'm not arguing against adolescent bisexuality—for one thing, it holds down the abortion rate. But when a fifteen-year-old boy can't see a girl at all, for his boy friend's ass, I think maybe the schools and the media are pushing it a little too much. When I was his age—"

High-rise country began, about where Boeing Field used to be. Not much diluted sunlight from there on—the tall boxes cut off all but an occasional shaft.

Linda laughed. "I know. When you were his age you were in love with the *Playboy* centerfold and got your sex in the bathroom with the door locked." She patted my thigh, high and inside; not expecting the touch, I jumped a little. "But didn't you ever—"

"A little. Playing around, experimenting, I guess. But not much."

Billy Jordal and I, maybe twelve. Excited as hell from talking about how it would be with a girl. Trying some things that were as close as we could think of to the real bit. Not doing too well at them. Then, when somebody else got caught, not us, learning what other people called what we'd done, and what they thought of it. After that, Billy and I weren't friends anymore. We stayed away from each other. At least, I thought, Les wasn't getting loaded down with all that guilt crap.

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"Oh, Johnny—isn't that the tunnel exit? I'll look... no, no enforcement behind, that I can see."

The waterfront tunnel exit was a permanent gripe of mine. Naturally, the tunnel itself was coded red—*no* combustion cars. But the exit ramp went several hundred yards in open air to get to the tunnel, and halfway along it was a second exit that saved me twenty minutes of dumb stop-and-go traffic. Because some moron ran his red pencil further up his map than necessary, all the way to I-5, I was not supposed to use that shortcut.

I did, though, habitually—except when I spotted enforcement in position to see me. I'd caught three tickets in four years; I figured I was ahead of the game. But it still pissed me. I'd written a letter to the morning paper once. It wasn't printed.

I won again—no pursuing tweeter, no pullover, no citation. But it still frosted me, having to take that chance for no good reason.

The thing is, I have better things to do with any twenty minutes of my life than to sit looking at red lights.

We drove west along the south edge of downtown. White-coded, to my right—no private vehicles at all. I let Linda off near a Transit station, about a dozen blocks from my parking area. We kissed. I was glad I'd married a woman who didn't forget how. "You want to wait and ride home with me," I said, "or go earlier?"

"No," she shook her head. "I'll take Transit to Renton and chances from there." I knew what she meant. The electric buses were regular, but we lived two miles from the nearest. The freelance jitneys were more flexible—if you could find one. Private cars would give rides sometimes, but a woman couldn't be too careful. Or a man, either, for that matter. Linda has a good instinct for safety, though. She'd had only one bad scare—a freak in a Rotarian suit; they'll fool you—and she'd gotten out of that one okay.

As soon as she entered the station, I drove on. The parking area at work handles eight or ten plants and hasn't enough security to plug your nosebleed. We get by because everybody knows there's nothing much to steal or mug in an industrial parking lot, outside of the Executive Section. There are a lot of rapes, though, mostly by employees. No security system can prevent all of those.

I got lucky, and parked only about half a mile from the plant. I decided the hell with the respirator; even down in industrial territory the smog was light. I brought it along, though; the afternoon could be different. The shuttle wasn't in sight or hearing, but the walk was good exercise; I could use it.

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I found the office shorthanded. That's par when it's not our regular workday, when we're shifted so that the high-pollution plants can operate on a low-smog day. It happens so irregularly that routine-bound types aren't braced for it and are apt to miss work.

Ten hours makes a long day; everyone gets irritable. Franzen over in Expediting tried to bend me once too often. I told him to freak out; it was time he knew I don't work for him. I came close to asking him to sign waivers with me and have it out: any limits he wanted, or none. He's big, all right, but not *that* big.

Being still chugged at Franzen was my only excuse, if any, for bumming Leda Robarge when she came around at the afternoon break. I knew her trick; everybody did, around there. Why she doesn't find a new hunting ground, I'll never know.

I have nothing against a little healthy seduction, or most forms of sexual freedom, in moderation. Linda and I will swing a little with good friends and don't begrudge each other an occasional night out. The time we tried a four-marriage, it broke up over such things as garlic and wet towels. But Leda's scene was not healthy.

She'd collected for help on two abortions—"My doctor has no *idea* how it could have happened"—before a third guy checked and found she'd drawn her Federal sterilization bonus when she was twenty.

My problem was that my skull was running at half speed, same as the air-conditioning. When she began to put it on me, fluttering her eyelids to emphasize the fashionable gold foil that covered them, I said, "Leda, I expect you're one hell of a good spread. But we have to think of the future."

"The future, Johnny? Why, I don't know what you mean."

"Well, if anything should go wrong—if you were to, say, get pregnant—don't worry about a thing, Leda. *I'll* have the baby for you."

She threw a mean coffee cup, but her aim was off. I felt a little guilty, but not much. People Pollution is bad enough; people who try to collect on it are even worse.

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That day couldn't end too soon, and it didn't. Trudging back to the car, I knew I'd been someplace. The smog was high; I should have used the respirator, but I was too pooped to bother.

And GodDAMN! Not thinking, I'd driven the little Matador all the way into the parking stall, leaving room for some ass to sneak a Midgie in behind me, crosswise inside the spotter-beam, blocking me. *You sonofasow!*

Midgie had chosen badly; I carry a dolly-jack in the rear-hood. Up and out with the heavy thing, under the braked back wheels; raise it. Now, where to put it?

Franzen's stall was close; I was tempted to dump it on him. He's a mechanical moron; he'd probably try to kick it to death. But I settled for leaving the Midge directly in the spotter-beam at the back of an empty stall. Not unhappily, I drove away. Midgie would probably pay about fifty for that one. *That'll teach you to screw around with the Green Hornet!*

A few blocks ahead of the on-ramp to I-5 South, I saw the blinker signals. Access had been cut from blue to yellow: external combustion, yes; me and my propane, no. For a while, until the smog level dropped and the signal changed back again, I was stuck.

I could cut over to old Route 99, like crawling on hands and knees. Or I could wait for I-5 South to shift back to blue. If it shifted within the hour, I was better off to wait. And more comfortable...

Yeah. Joe's Stoneboat Bar was off to the right, not far. I stopped there sometimes, knew a few of the people. For instance, one of the doctors from the nearby hospital was an engraved character.

I turned right, and three blocks later pulled the Matador into the shady side of Joe's parking lot. I hated to button up the car in the heat.

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The Stoneboat was cool inside. The back room, away from the TV-juke, was quiet except for the crowd noise. I figure that's why Joe usually works that room himself and lets his hired help handle the front.

"A live one, Johnny?" said Joe. I nodded. Live-yeast beer is my favorite low-high; sometimes I wonder how we ever got along without it.

Even after three years a bar doesn't smell right to me without stale cigarette smoke; the Stoneboat smelled only of beer and last month's repainting.

I knew the two men at the table next to the end of the bar. We said "Hi" and I sat with them.

Artie Rail was singing it down about his stupid car some more. "I just dunno what I'm going to do, fellas." He said it with his usual whine. "I'm about ready to turn it in for the demolition bonus. Except I can't afford to buy anything I *can* afford—if you see what I mean."

Sure, I saw what he meant. Artie was paying three, four hundred in horsepower tax, and close to the same for the area of his Detroit parade-float. He was in a tight knot, all right.

Hollis MacIlwain wasn't wasting his sympathy, if he had any. "Oh hell, Artie, it's your own fault. You bought that Cadillac when the taxes you bitch about were already in the talk stage. It was a damn fool trick, and you know it."

"Yeah?" Artie bit back. "*You* weren't all that happy, Hollis, when you had to put in short pistons to cut your compression for no-lead gas. Anyway, my brother-in-law gave me a real good deal on that Cad."

"So sue your brother-in-law." Hollis's gravel voice was weary. "Don't load me with your grotches."

I wasn't much interested, either; I'd heard it all before. We'd each had to make our choices. I'd made my bet two years ago, good or not, and got it over with. But here they were, still at it.

"What ya think's the best pick in the new stuff coming out?" Artie said. "Joe, you got any upper ideas on that?"

"Hard to tell. General Ford's selling its little electrics a lot, for short-haul. The ones with the plug-in packs."

"Yeah," I said, "but you use 20 percent of the charge just lugging the pack around. Okay if you don't use a car much, I guess."

"Hey, Joe," said Hollis, "gimme a tink and tonic." He had bills on the table, and his card for Joe to punch. "You know what *I* think?" We did, but he went ahead with it anyway.

"Until somebody without an expense account can afford one of those fuel-cell jobbies, you're not going to beat the little Japanese outside-burners, like the hot-air Honda my nephew got." He went on with it, but I wasn't listening. He always says it just about the same,

Hollis does, as if it were real news.

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A new customer came in, a young fat little guy, letting the TV-juke noise come with him as he opened the door. It was *the Stucco Crocodile*, doing "Baby, You're a Sidewiser." I didn't notice anyone inviting him, but he came and sat with us anyway.

The three of us gave each other the look that said that none of us knew him. The Stoneboat got trade from people hanging around the hospital waiting-rooms up the next block. Usually, though, they stayed in the front room with the juke to take their minds off their worries.

"Tink and soda," the new guy said. Joe waited until the man remembered and got his card out, to go with his money. "It's all right, bartender. First one today." So Joe punched the card, counted the drops of tincture he shook into the glass, and added the ice and soda. The man didn't get the extra drop, I noticed, that Joe usually gave his regular customers, law or no law. His first sip went long and deep; he grimaced at the bitterness. Personally I like a mix that covers the taste.

"Aah! That's what I needed." He smiled, then apparently thought better of it. "Oh, bartender! I'm expecting a call. From the hospital. They'll ask for Mr. Anstruther. If you don't mind."

"Sure," said Joe, "no trouble. Bleeding for some news?"

"Yes." Anstruther looked embarrassed. "My wife is—er, having a baby."

We were all careful not to look at him. Then I thought, what the hell; it happens sometimes. And he was pretty young; maybe it was his first. Couldn't blame a man for that, even now. I had two myself, but they dated from when nobody knew any better. Now, there wasn't that excuse.

More to break the silence than anything else, I said, "Hey, Joe! Throw a tink in a live one for me, will you?" That's the way I like tink; I can't taste it through live beer. Joe inspected the card with a straight face before he punched it—I mean, he knows I seldom tink up and hardly ever take the limit of three in one day.

He gave me the extra drop for being a regular, though. Someday, I thought, he's going to get narked off

for that. I hoped Anstruther was only a would-be daddy-boy and not something else.

"You know?" said Anstruther. "They had tink over in Britain and Europe for years, before most of us here ever heard of it. Say, I might as well have another one." He pushed forward his card and money. Joe obliged him. Anstruther, I saw, still didn't get the extra drop.

"Anyway," he went on, "I think the administration made a good compromise, legalizing only the liquid form. Makes it a lot easier to control."

"Hell," said Artie Rail, "all they wanted was to get reelected, just like always. Any campaign's a snow job; what makes this year any different?"

Well, who could argue? Give one side a little, but not enough to grotch the other side. That's politics and always will be.

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The phone chimed. Anstruther stood and moved to the bar. Joe picked up the handpiece, listened, and handed it over. He faced the console piece toward the other man. By habit—the visual was off; someone at the other end was saving money on the call.

"Yes?" said Anstruther. "I'll be right over." He came back to the table and gulped his second tink, which is not a good idea. Then he bolted out.

Hollis smiled. "That guy has a point. Who would have figured that when pot got legal, we'd be drinking it instead of smoking it?"

I wished he hadn't said that. I still miss tobacco. Not enough to bootleg it, though. Then I relaxed, beginning to stone-up from the tink. It *is* nice, once in a while. It was a little while before I started to listen again.

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Artie was off and running, about his kid, this time. "They're trying to turn the boy queer or something in them schools," he said. "Other day I caught him and his buddy—you wouldn't believe it! And he had the bowels to say to his own father..."

I didn't bother to argue. I had my own misgivings to argue with, and I wished I knew which side of me was right.

When I tuned in again, Artie was still going. "And you know what else? He asked, did I rather he went and got his sterilization bonus? At *his* age? Hell, I want grandchildren, like anybody else." He grinned, looking uneasy. "Not too many, o' course. But, freakin' Jeez—*one*, anyway. I believe in Zero Population Growth, but not Zero Population."

Nobody answered Artie; he didn't ask questions that *had* good answers. He went back to creebing about his car; every place he wanted to go, the routes were more and more coded-out against him. Green-code routes, no restrictions, were getting hard to come by.

So what *else* was top-line news? I could see the handwriting on the wall, too. The only difference between Artie and me was that I believed it meant what it said.

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The door to the front swung open; it was Anstruther again. The blast we caught from the TV-juke was *Lefty and the Seven Feeps*, striding on "Up Your Taxes."

"Tink and soda," he said, waving his card. This time he didn't sit with us, but climbed onto the nearest barstool. "Yes, I know," he said, "last for the day." Joe nodded, he hadn't argued. "But fitting, you know," the man continued. "Very fitting."

"Yeah?" said Hollis MacIlwain. "What fits it so nice?"

Anstruther didn't answer right away. He sipped on his tink while Artie began the next chapter of how the whole damn world wasn't set up for his personal tastes. I can listen to that all night without ever hearing much of it. Not that I hang in at Joe's that heavy; I wasn't even late home for dinner yet.

Anstruther raised his glass. "Three tinks," he said, "And three—"

"And three what?" Hollis said. Anstruther didn't say anything. I got a hunch.

"Three, uh—kids, maybe?" I said. "Three *kids*, you have?"

Whatever Anstruther wanted to say, it wouldn't come out. He tried to shake his head, but all it did was wobble a little.

"Three kids," said Artie Rail. For once, he wasn't whining. "You Goddamn *breeder!*"

"All right, three kids!" Anstruther blurted. He pulled his head up, sat straight. "It's not a crime. Not yet..." True, but still... Then he threw it. "And maybe we'll have another, too, if we happen to want to!"

Silence. Then the sound of chairs being pushed back. Joe was the first to speak up. "Whatever you do, do it *outside!*"

I didn't really feel like it, being stoned, and I don't suppose Hollis did, either. But it was too much. Anstruther hadn't made an apology, much less an excuse, and then he'd said maybe he'd do it again. Hollis got him by the neck and one arm; I had the other arm. We took him out the back way, to the alley.

We used to say, "Up against the wall," and Anstruther sure as hell was. But he didn't fight, or even try to. All he said was, "Not all three of you, for God's sakes!" That was fine with Hollis and me; we stepped back. And Anstruther did get his hands up, looking fairly competent.

Still it was no fair fight; Artie was Golden Gloves once. He faked Anstruther's hands high and slammed him in the gut, then threw his hard one.

Anstruther's head cracked back against the bricks; he collapsed.

Artie knelt beside him. "Jeez; I didn't mean to *kill* the bastard. Just to show him how the cow ate the cabbage." Artie looked scared. "You think he's all right?"

The man was still breathing; Artie relaxed a little. Hollis was looking into Anstruther's wallet; he showed it to Artie and me, then stuffed it back into the man's pocket.

"We might as well go back in," he said.

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Inside, on our table, three tinks were set up. Our usuals, on the house and no cards punched. Joe had one, too. We all drank a little off the top. I don't think anybody thought it was a toast.



"Call an ambulance for that guy," said Hollis.

"Sure thing," said Joe. "In about an hour."

"No," said Artie. "Now. We did wrong on him."

"What the hell you mean?" said Joe.

Artie sure didn't like to have to say it. "He has a ZPG card. Sterilization bonus, a little over a year ago."

"Bullshit!" Joe said. "His wife just had her kid today."

"Yeah, sure," I said. "But whose?"

"Jesus! No wonder he—" Joe didn't finish it.

You don't waste a tink; we drank them, then left before the ambulance could get there. It's one thing to admit you screwed up, and something else to stay around and pay for it. Tough world, little brother.

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I-5 South was blue again; I got home before my warmed-over dinner was too tired to eat. Marise and Les were both out someplace. I didn't feel much like talking.

"Anthing special happen today?" Linda asked.

I thought about it. "Well, yes. Joe at the Stoneboat set up three tinks on the house."